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HEADLINE: Utah lawmakers seek West's support

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BODY:

Armed with the support of Western state lawmakers, state leaders are now seeking backing from Western governors, attorneys general and others for an initiative that would reel in billions for **education** from the federal government.

Gov. Mike Leavitt will approach Western state governors at a conference in early December to gauge support for the **Action Plan for Public Lands and Education**, or APPLE, initiative, while Attorney General Mark Shurtleff will test the waters at a Western Attorneys General conference in November, according to a vote of the Constitutional Defense Council at a meeting on Monday.

Education associations, legislators and county commissioners will also do their part to spread the word and measure commitment levels of counterparts in other Western states. The Constitutional Defense Council includes the governor, attorney general, county commissioners and legislators.

"This boils down to raw politics. It's the Eastern against the Western," Leavitt said. "It's going to require political power."

In July, Western state lawmakers pitched in their support of the Utah-initiated **Action Plan for Public Lands and Education**, which seeks money from the federal government that state leaders say schools are losing because of federal land policies.

Through the initiative, House Speaker Marty Stephens, R-Farr West, wants to establish a revenue stream and have a better exchange process for uncontested lands. It would be cheaper and faster to go through Congress for the money than to go through the courts, but a lawsuit against the federal government is an option if political efforts fail, Stephens said.

Although Western states don't have large voting numbers, if they are united, the issue can be used as a bargaining chip, he said.

"We think we can get this done if we can build a good coalition in the West," Stephens said.

He said he hopes to have APPLE steering committees in place in all Western states, Hawaii and Alaska, by the end of the year.

Utah lawmakers are spearheading the initiative because they estimate Utah's educational funding woes -- as well as school budget problems in other Western states -- are largely a result of large federal holdings in the Western United States.

The federal government owns an average of 52 percent of each state's land in 11 Western states compared to an average of 4 percent of other states. States cannot collect taxes or receive full royalties from developing natural resources on that land.

If the initiative comes to fruition, the federal government would pay out \$14 billion along with \$6.4 billion a year to compensate for the lost funds, money that would come from federal revenue growth, not land sales.

The Constitutional Defense Council members will meet again in about three months to form an action plan.